THE HISTORY OF ECCLESIASTICAL ARCHITECTURE IN ENGLAND.*

THE INFLUENCE OF THE SAXON PERIOD UPON POINTED ARCHITECTURE.

In the interesting account of his laborious researches, which Mr. Layard gives in his recent book on ancient Nineveh, and in the examination of the works of a people of whose history and manners all other evidence has passed away,—in Pompeii—aptly termed a fossil remain of ancient life and manners,—in the rock-cut temples of India, or the pyramids of Egypt,—in the old world or the new,—wherever the growth of intelligence in man can claim a record in history, there the architect points to the value of *his* art as the mirror and impression of the past. As the silent deposits of the ocean, and the great convulsions of the land, have enabled the geologist to pourtray the structure and habits of animate beings in ages past in the *earth's* history—to which the thousands of years which date from the fall of Nineveh, are an insignificant fraction of time—so the mounds of the desert and the ashes of the volcano enshrined the existence of other generations, for the discovery and wonder of the present.

The Assyrian passed away, and the empire which extended from beyond the Tigris to the Mediterranean, was lost to the historian, the very name of Nineveh was forgotten, and another race built upon its site, and, like its predecessor, perished in the night of time, and its works were covered with the sand; but the accumulations of ages only preserved the enduring record of architecture to be exposed in our own time. Shall, then, the architect not claim as a great art, that which has this high power of contributing to so vast a field of human inquiry? or shall the world think lightly of the enthusiasm which is aroused by the arts of Greece, or the relics of mediæval art in our own country?

A modern generation, boastful of ingenuity in research, and power to accomplish great undertakings, may well marvel at the vast power of conception and the tasteful execution in the works of the mediæval architects in Europe. The untiring energy which was brought to bear on the erection of structures, which still, even in their state of comparative poverty and dilapidation, so powerfully impress the beholder, and the deep religious feeling of which it was the expression, are occasionally forgotten by some, who see only the superstition and priestcraft which did too often accompany it. We, however, can find such evidence of the beautiful in art, and the good in Christian effort and example in these relics, that we are not altogether surprised, that some should now almost identify themselves with the whole spirit of the middle ages; and they are not without words to answer those who venerate other schools of art, less Christian in purpose and character. Looking, however, from an age essentially practical, upon the works of "the masters of a great art in its highest application," with an anxiety to aid every effort to place before us, as Mr. Poole says, "a more vivid, as well as a more just perception of the merits of their works," hailing, indeed, every work that helps to complete the chain of that great history of human progress, of which—as we before said—architecture is the expression, we cannot but often wish that a different use were made of these works by some non-professional writers—as we so often wish a different application of their architectural features by architects. We therefore regret that Mr. Poole, in the laborious compilation which is very usefully included in the scheme of his history, has not, as it appears to us—notwithstanding the disclaimer in his preface—sufficiently distinguished in the text, between the opinions and feelings of the monkish historians—"left to speak for themselves on such subjects as miracles, doctrines, and counsels of perfection," and his own treatment of the subject. It is true we read that—"We neither do nor can think, believe, and feel with them ourselves, and we should deprecate nothing more seriously than a use of their works which should lead others to an indiscriminate reception of their facts, or of their theology;" and we also are disposed to consider that "the opinions which they express, the feelings which they avow, even the stories which they relate, whether they be or be not real and true in themselves, or in our judgment, are clearly so in the philosophy of the history of art;" but a practised writer might have been expected continually to provide against the possibility of misconception in this particular, as well elsewhere as in a preface, and we the more regret this peculiarity of our author's style, as he displays in many places, a judicious critical discrimination between the characteristics of the art. Thus in speaking of polychromy for example, where he says, "we do not now think colour an additional beauty to really good imagery and carving," he is favourably contrasted in our mind, with some who seem to "plead in excuse of the excessive use of colour in the ecclesiastical decorations of the middle ages."

The author has endeavoured to combine, in his volume, "a general history of the greater English ecclesiastical architects of the middle ages with an equally general review of their works, and of the characters which distinguish the buildings of their respective ages;" and the work may therefore be taken to be a history of the church, as illustrated by the progress of pointed architecture, rather than a mere notice of peculiarities of styles, to which branch of the subject other writers had more particularly devoted themselves. Mr. Poole seems to have addressed himself to the general public, less than to those who may possess other works on the subject, since his book has the peculiarity—in these days of elaborate illustration—of being entirely destitute of plates and woodcuts. A knowledge of the characteristics of the different styles, consequently, can perhaps better be gained by a novice, from other works, the author here seeming to enter rather into the *rationale* of a change, than to depict every imaginable variation in its occurrence.

But if, for a tolerable idea of the great skill, and the beauty of design and workmanship, displayed in the details of Gothic edifices, we must look elsewhere, Mr. Poole has given us evidence of the abilities and zeal of the men who erected the ecclesiastical edifices. The immense influence of this zeal, it is indeed difficult to convey an adequate impression of. Taking up the map of any country, wherever we find a church indicated, we shall make few mistakes in attributing it to the period which preceded the Reformation. Not that churches were *never* erected in the reigns of Charles II. and Queen Anne, or that the last few years have been idle in the work of building, but the number of such structures is insignificant, compared with the multitude of those, of which the thickly set villages of the country can each furnish an interesting example. In the year 1268, Branescombe, bishop of Exeter, is said to have consecrated no less than forty churches in his diocese, whilst we are told that now Devonport in the same diocese, "with a population of 26,000, has not a single church."

But this holy ardour in the erection of ecclesiastical edifices, is by no means peculiarly remarkable in the period subsequent to the Conquest, but is apparent during the Saxon period. If, indeed, it may be doubted whether Sprott in his "Chronicle," has accurately stated the number of churches, at the time of the Conquest, at 45,011, there is very little reason to doubt Mr. Poole's accuracy in inferring that it amounted to four thousand, or about one-third of the present number.

But these remarkable ancestors of those whom something more than national pride now characterizes as a remarkable race, were not distinguished merely by their zeal in spreading the influence of religion, nor by the number only of their contributions to its exercise. The architect accustomed to the rude masonry of such of the churches as are ascribed to the Saxons, might perhaps pass over as unimportant, the inventions of a people who may not have had the ability to conceive the beautiful models of their successors. But, even omitting the evidence of ancient manuscripts and illuminations to the skill of Saxon artists,—which, however, is most important in the history of art, when its several branches were more united than they are at present,—we find a great amount of skill in many branches of ecclesiastical art, in which, as it would be impossible to deny magnificence of effect, it might be equally easy to recognise the element of taste. Indeed, whilst Italy passed through centuries of time, in which it is difficult to discover any evidence of the influence of art, the churchmen of England were devoted to the service of religion through its agency. Accomplished in all the learning of Glastonbury, and possessed of remarkable energy and devotion to all that could advance the influence of the church and the priesthood, Dunstan, as he was the most celebrated man of that day, so is he no unfit type of the learning of his class. His future greatness shadowed forth in childhood,—according to one of the characteristic stories of the period,—by the vision of an angel, who stretched a surveyor's measuring-line over the area of a church ("Mensoris funiculum per plana atrii extendens"), becoming "learned beyond all his fellows in philosophy, he was also wonderfully skilled in manual operations. He was a painter and a scribe, and we have still proofs remaining of his proficiency in these arts." But it is still more important to find the remark, that he was "a diligent and skilful artificer in gold, silver, brass, and iron, and used the more delicate graver's tools as well as the hammer and the tongs." And it is not unnecessary to notice, that he was acquainted with both the science and practice of music, and that he was able to make organs, nor that he could design patterns for embroidery. And we cannot read of the profuse application of the precious metals to the purposes of architecture, and the constant use of painting and sculpture, without inferring a very different state of the art during the Saxon period than the mere evidence of such churches as Brixworth or Earl's Barton now afford.

Though materials are found for the history of ecclesiastical architecture in a period even preceding that of the Saxons—commencing with the wooden building at Glastonbury, of the year of our Lord 63; unanimously allowed to have been the oldest Christian church, and shown by Mr. Petrie to have been most important in its influence over the churches of Ireland,—and although we find the name of King Lucius, in the second century, associated with the names of some which were afterwards important buildings—Westminster Abbey amongst the number; although we have mention of a church at St. Albans "of most beautiful workmanship," and containing a shrine decorated "with gold and jewels," and although it has not been omitted to remark upon the indirect influence of the Roman sway, which taught the workmen of Britain the use of mortar, and made them famous, and in which the use and disposition of bricks—often actually worked up into succeeding buildings—greatly influenced the decoration of the Saxon and Norman architects,—although in the pages of Geoffry of Monmouth, and the story of Merlin, we might find evidence of the skill in the arts of construction which afterwards led to such great results, and we have notices of cathedrals and monasteries *rebuilt* by King Arthur—who dwelt in palaces adorned with gilded roofs—as well as the direct statement that during that time "Britain had arrived at such a pitch of grandeur that, in abundance of riches, luxury of ornaments, and politeness of inhabitants, it far surpassed other kingdoms;" it is to our *Saxon* ancestors that we must more particularly look for influences upon the characteristic features of pointed architecture.

The influence of the Saxons is generally dated from the conversion of Ethelbert by Augustine, about the year 597, and, in the history of the venerable Bede, we soon find records of the building and reparation of churches, and of the conversion of heathen temples to the service of Christianity; we also find that sacred vessels, vestments, books, and relics were furnished from Rome, and the future state of architecture in England is thus early shadowed forth in the institution of monasteries, and the erection of churches at Canterbury, Rochester, London, and York, and oratories in various parts of the island. Then too, Iona, a barren rock in a tempestuous sea, became a school of knowledge, so that, though in a later style of architecture, it has to this day "memorials of its past importance not to be surpassed in historic interest by the mighty piles of York and Durham, or the halls of Oxford or of Cambridge." So important a seat of learning was not without influence in

* "A History of Ecclesiastical Architecture in England," by George Ashby Poole, M.A., Vicar of Welford. London, Masters. 8vo.

For Info on OCR and PDF Compression go to ThePaperlessOffice.org